

DEVICE AND METHOD FOR CONTROLLING FUEL CELL SYSTEM

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] 1. Field of the Invention

[0002] The present invention relates generally to the field of fuel cells, and in particular to a device for controlling a fuel cell system and a method for performing the control operation for the fuel cell system.

[0003] 2. Description of the Prior Art

[0004] Fuel cells are an electro-chemical device that make use of electro-chemical reaction between a fuel, such as hydrogen, and an oxidizer, such as oxygen contained in the surrounding air, to generate electrical power. The fuel cells are advantageous in low contamination, high efficiency and high power density. Thus, developments and researches are intensively devoted to the fuel cell field for exploitation of the utilization thereof. A variety of fuel cells are available, among which proton exchange membrane fuel cell, abbreviated as PEMFC, is the most prospective one due to the advantages of low operation temperature, fast activation and high power density with respect to unit weight and volume.

[0005] A typical fuel cell stack is comprised of a number of membrane electrode assemblies (MEA). Each MEA comprises an anode catalyst layer, a polymeric proton exchange membrane and a cathode catalyst layer. A basic cell can be formed by coupling the MEA with two gas diffusers and a bipolar plate in an overlapping and stacked manner.

[0006] The operation of the fuel cells is dependent upon the proton exchange membrane that functions to convey protons between the cathode and the anode of the fuel cell for the progress of the electro-chemical reaction. The performance of the fuel cells is heavily dependent upon the reaction conditions, such as operation temperature, hydrogen flow rate and air flow rate. On the other hand, the operation safety of the fuel cells is dependent upon output voltage and current

of the fuel cells. Besides the above factors that affect the overall performance/effectiveness of the fuel cells, in order to realize the optimum performance and safe operation of the fuel cells, additional effective control measures are required.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0007] Thus, a primary object of the present invention is to provide a control device for operating fuel cell systems in optimum conditions.

[0008] Another object of the present invention is to provide a control method for controlling the operation of the fuel cell to realize the optimum performance of the fuel cell system.

[0009] A further object of the present invention is to provide a control device for controlling and providing safe operation of the fuel cell system by detecting operation conditions of the fuel cells and, in response thereto, initializing a control process in accordance with the detection result.

[0010] To achieve the above objects, in accordance with the present invention, there is provided a control device for controlling the operation of a fuel cell system. The control device comprises a microprocessor, a voltage detection circuit, a current detection circuit, a hydrogen pressure detection circuit, a temperature detection circuit, an air flow rate control circuit that is controlled in a pulse width modulation manner, and a pulse signal generation circuit. The air flow rate control circuit is controlled by the microprocessor for regulating the air flow rate through an air supply conduit in a pulse width modulation manner in accordance with output current of a fuel cell stack. The pulse signal generation circuit is controlled by the microprocessor to generate pulse signals for controlling hydrogen flow through a hydrogen supply conduit. The control device monitors the operation conditions of the fuel cell system and performs a preset control process to control the operation of the fuel cell stack so as to optimize the efficiency and overall performance of the fuel cell system.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0011] The present invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art by reading the following description of a preferred embodiment thereof, with reference to the attached drawings, in which:

[0012] Figure 1 is a system block diagram of a fuel cell system in accordance with the present invention; and

[0013] Figure 2 is a block diagram of a control device of the fuel cell system of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0014] With reference to the drawings and in particular to **Figure 1**, a fuel cell system in accordance with the present invention comprises a fuel cell stack **1** that is comprised of a number of membrane electrode assemblies (MEAs), each comprising an anode electrode layer, a proton exchange membrane and a cathode electrode layer, which together forms a basic cell unit of electro-chemical reaction. The MEAs are combined with a hydrogen diffuser, an air diffuser and a bipolar plate in a cascade manner to form the fuel cell. A conductor plate and an end plate are then secured to opposite ends of a number of MEAs to form the fuel cell stack. The MEAs of a fuel cell stack are electrically connected in either serial manner or parallel manner to provide an output of predetermined voltage and current. The fuel cell stack has a positive terminal (marked "+" in the drawing) and a negative terminal (marked "-" in the drawing) for supply of a direct current as output to a load **2**.

[0015] For the electro-chemical reaction carried out inside the fuel cells stack **1**, air is drawn into the fuel cell stack **1** by a air pumping device **32**, such as a blower, through an air filter **31**, both being connected to the fuel cell stack **1** by an air supply conduit. Hydrogen, on the other hand, is supplied by a fuel supply device **4** to the fuel cell stack **1**. The fuel supply device **4** is comprised of a number of alloy-based hydrogen storage canisters **41**, each containing hydrogen therein for serving as fuel for the fuel cell stack **1**. The hydrogen supplied from the fuel supply device **4** is conducted along a hydrogen supply conduit (not

labeled) through a hydrogen valve **42** and a pressure regulator **43** to the fuel cell stack **1**. The hydrogen valve **42** and the pressure regulator **43** function to control the flow rate and pressure of the hydrogen supplied to the fuel cells stack **1**. A hydrogen exhaust valve **44** is mounted to the fuel cell stack **1** for relief of additional and residual hydrogen, as well as other undesired gases and liquids, from the fuel cell stack **1**.

[0016] A temperature regulation device comprises a heat radiator **51**, a fan **52**, a heat exchanger **53**, a pump **54** and a water tank **55** for controlling and maintaining a constant temperature for the operation of the fuel cell stack **1**. The water tank **55** reserves an amount of water serving as cooling agent. The pump **54** conveys the water from the water tank **55** through the heat exchanger **53** that is contained in the fuel supply device **4** toward the heat radiator **51**. The fan **52** causes air flows through the radiator **51** for dissipation of heat from the water flowing through the radiator **51** into the surrounding air and thus cooling the water. The cooled water is conducted through the fuel cell stack **1** by a water supply conduit whereby temperature inside the fuel cell stack **1** can be controlled and maintained at a desired level or operation temperature. The water tank **5** also functions to collect water generated by the electro-chemical reaction induced in the fuel cells stack **1** as byproducts.

[0017] In accordance with the present invention, a control device **6** is incorporated in the fuel cell system for controlling the operation of the fuel cell system. Also referring to **Figure 2**, the control device **6** comprises a microprocessor **61** to which a random access memory (RAM) **611** and a read only memory (ROM) **612** are incorporated. The control device **6** comprises a voltage detection circuit **62** and a current detection circuit **63** connected to the positive and negative terminals of the fuel cell stack **1**.

[0018] The voltage detection circuit **62** detects an output voltage of the fuel cell stack **1** across the positive (“+”) and negative (“-”) terminals of the fuel cells stack **1**. The output voltage of the fuel cell stack **1** is analog and is indicated by reference numeral “V” in the drawings. The voltage detection circuit **62** comprises an analog-to-digital converter that converts the analog output voltage V into a digital signal that is then applied to the microprocessor **61**.

[0019] The current detection circuit **63** detects an output direct current of the

fuel cell stack 1 across the positive (“+”) and negative (“-”) terminals. The output current of the fuel cell stack 1, which is indicated by reference numeral “I” in the drawings, is processed by an analog-to-digital converter, which converts the analog output current I into a digital signal that is then applied to the microprocessor 61.

[0020] A hydrogen pressure detection circuit 64 comprises a high pressure side (upstream side) pressure gauge P1 and a low pressure side (downstream side) pressure gauge P2 mounted to the hydrogen supply conduit connecting the fuel supply device 4 and the fuel cell stack 1, respective upstream and downstream of the hydrogen valve 42 and the pressure regulator 43. The pressure gauges P1 and P2 detect the hydrogen pressure inside the hydrogen supply conduit on the upstream and downstream sides and provide signals corresponding to the upstream hydrogen pressure (pressure of the hydrogen discharged from the fuel supply device 4) and the downstream hydrogen pressure (pressure of the hydrogen supplied to the fuel cell stack 1 that is regulated by the pressure regulator 43) to an analog-to-digital converter incorporated in the hydrogen pressure detection circuit 64, which generates and applies digital signals representing the upstream and downstream hydrogen pressures to the microprocessor 61.

[0021] A temperature detection circuit 65 comprises a first temperature gauge T1 and a second temperature gauge T2 mounted to the water supply conduit that conducts the cooling water through the fuel cell stack 1, respective upstream and downstream of the fuel cell stack 1. The temperature gauges T1 and T2 detect the temperature of the cooling water flowing through the water supply conduit upstream and downstream of the fuel cell stack 1 and provide signals corresponding to the upstream water temperature and the downstream water temperature, which broadly speaking are related to the temperature inside the fuel cell stack 1, to an analog-to-digital converter incorporated in the temperature detection circuit 65, which generates and applies digital signals representing the upstream and downstream water temperatures to the microprocessor 61.

[0022] An air flow control circuit 66 comprises a pulse width modulation (PWM) circuit controlled by the microprocessor 61 to generate a PWM control signal S1 for controlling the air flow rate caused by the air pumping device 32 to supply to the fuel cell stack 1.

[0023] A pulse generation circuit 67 is controlled by the microprocessor 61 to generate pulse signal S2 that controls opening/closing operation of the hydrogen valve 42. By means of the control of the hydrogen valve 42 by the pulse signal S2 generated by the pulse generation circuit 67, the flow of hydrogen from the fuel supply device 4 to the fuel cell stack 1 can be well controlled. For example, the hydrogen valve 42 can be operated in a normally open manner and is shut down by the pulse signal S2 every 30 seconds until the hydrogen pressure inside the hydrogen supply conduit drops below a predetermined level. Thereafter, the hydrogen valve 42 is opened again to resume supply of hydrogen to the fuel cell stack 1.

[0024] The control device 6 further comprises an exhaust valve control circuit 68 and a pump control circuit 69 coupled to the microprocessor 61. Under the control of the microprocessor 61, the exhaust valve control circuit 68 generates an exhaust valve control signal S3, which controls opening/closing of the exhaust valve 44. The pump control circuit 69, under the control of the microprocessor 61, generates a pump control signal S4 for controlling the operation of the pump 54.

[0025] In addition, the control device 6 comprises a default setting storage unit 71 coupled to the microprocessor 61 for storage of default setting values or reference values of operation parameters, such as rated voltage, rated current, maximum current, hydrogen pressure, and operation temperature. A setting unit 72 is coupled to the microprocessor 61 for establishing a control process and setting the operation parameters by for example an operator. Thus, the operator may enter desired settings for the operation parameters, as well as establishing any desired control process based on requirements for each particular case. The fuel cell stack 1 may then be operated in accordance with the established control process, based on the operation parameters set in the storage unit 71 under the control of the control device 6.

[0026] Based on the hardware architecture described above, the present invention also offers a method for controlling the operation of the fuel cell stack 1, comprising the following steps. At first, the control method starts with a start-up routing for activation of the fuel cell system by opening the hydrogen valve 42 whereby hydrogen is supplied from the fuel supply device 4 to the fuel cell stack

1. The air pumping device **32** is then turned on to draw in the surrounding air, which contains oxygen, and supply the air to the fuel cell stack **1** at a maximum air flow rate for a predetermined period of time. The supply of the air at the maximum air flow rate helps removing any water residual inside the fuel cell stack **1**, such as water that remains in separator plates of the fuel cell stack during the previous operation. Thereafter, the air flow rate is reduced to a minimum level and at the same time, the hydrogen exhaust valve **44** is opened for a given period of time, such as 3 seconds, to expel impure gases out of the fuel cell stack **1** and the associated piping thereof.

[0027] Next, a temperature regulation routing is initiated by turning on the fan **52** and the pump **54** to control and maintain the fuel cell stack **1** at a desired operation temperature.

[0028] An operation control routing is then started wherein the control device **6** detects the hydrogen pressures **P1**, **P2** at both the high and low pressure sides of the hydrogen supply conduit. In case the low pressure side hydrogen pressure **P2** is below a predetermined level, such as 4 Psi, the hydrogen valve **42** is opened for a period of time, such as 5 seconds. The hydrogen pressures **P1**, **P2** are constantly monitored and each time the low pressure side hydrogen pressure **P2** drops below the predetermined level, the hydrogen valve **42** is opened for the given period of time. The time period when the hydrogen valve **42** is opened and the predetermined level of the low pressure side hydrogen pressure **P2** are stored in the storage unit **71** and can be changed by means of the setting unit **72**.

[0029] The control device **6** detects the output current **I** of the fuel cell stack **1**. Based on the output current **I**, the air flow rate caused by the air pumping device **32** is changed. In an embodiment of the present invention, the air pumping device **32** is driven by an electrical motor that is controlled by the control device **6** in a pulse width modulation manner. The air pumping device **32** is controlled to provide a minimum flow rate of 50 slm. An example of the control of the air flow rate of the air pumping device **32** is as follows:

[0030] (1) When the output current **I** is smaller than a preset lower limit, **I_{min}**, such as 20 Amps, the air flow rate of the air pumping device **32** is set at the minimum value.

[0031] (2) When the output current **I** is greater than the lower limit **I_{min}**, but

smaller than a preset upper limit, I_{max} , the flow rate is set to be three times of the required flow rate in accordance with the output current I in order to supply sufficient oxygen to the fuel cell stack 1.

[0032] (3) When the output current I is greater than the upper limit I_{max} , the flow rate of the air pumping device 32 is set to the maximum flow rate that can be taken by the air pumping device 32.

[0033] The output voltage of the fuel cell stack 1 may get lowered when liquid accumulation occurs inside the fuel cell stack 1. In this case, the air pumping device 32 supplies air at the maximum air flow rate to remove the accumulated liquid. For example, if the rated output voltage of the fuel cell stack 1 is 48 volts and if a lower bound of the output voltage is set to be 36-42 volts, when the detected value of the output voltage, such as 42 volts, is lower than the rated value, the air pumping device 32 is controlled to supply air at the maximum air flow rate for a given period of time, such as 3 seconds, and then resumes the normal flow rate. At the same time, the hydrogen exhaust valve 44 is opened for a given period of time, such as 0.5 seconds, in order to expel the liquid accumulated in the fuel cell stack 1. In case the output voltage of the fuel cell stack 1 gets down into the threshold of the lower bound, such as 36 volts, for the sake of safety of operation, the fuel cell system is completely shut down.

[0034] Theoretical normal operation temperature of the fuel cell stack 1 is between 45-60°C. When the operation temperature of the fuel cell stack 1 is within the normal operation temperature range, the operation of the fuel cell is kept. When the temperature gets higher than the normal operation temperature, the fan 52 is actuated and air flow is caused through the radiator 51 to lower down the temperature of the cooling water that flows through the fuel cell stack 1 in order to have the temperature of the fuel cell stack 1 get lower than for example 45°C. When the temperature continuously rises and gets higher than an upper bound of temperature set for safe operation, such as 85°C, the fuel cell system is completely shut down for safety purposes.

[0035] To this point, it is apparent to those skilled in the art that the control device 6 of the present invention, when incorporated with a fuel cell system, effectively maintains the optimum operation of the fuel cell system by monitoring the operation conditions thereof. Efficiency and operation safety of the fuel cell

system is thus enhanced.

[0036] Although the present invention has been described with reference to the preferred embodiment thereof and the best mode for controlling the operation of the fuel cells, it is apparent to those skilled in the art that a variety of modifications and changes may be made without departing from the scope of the present invention which is intended to be defined by the appended claims.